

THE SCHOOL IN THE SWAMP

By Liv Haysom

I was really surprised when my Mum told me that, in the past, there had been a school in Piha.

To me, this was a mystery because I only have the choice of catching the bus from my home in Piha to Oratia School, or getting a lift by car.

I kept wondering why there was no longer a school at Piha. How easy my life would be if I didn't have to travel all that way just to go to school.

We then decided to go looking for the old school site.

Tucked away behind the Piha Art Gallery, we discovered the tattered remains of the old school. Faded, yellow weatherboards, rusty nails and inside stood a little kitchen stove in the corner. Apart from the blackboard at the front of the room, I couldn't imagine that this had once been a school.



Now I really wanted to find out more about this tiny school.

Children in Piha have been taught in many unusual places including: old sheep shearing quarters, sand-blown old baches and even sheds.

The first official school was in the Ushers Ocean View house, in 1910, although a school operated unofficially in the late 1890s in a building that no longer exists. In 1913 the school moved to a site at the Piha Mill until it closed down in 1921.

Mr Robertson was one of the first teachers in Piha. He taught half the week at Piha and half the week at Whatipu. I wonder how he travelled such a huge distance twice a week? (*JT Diamond Collection Archive No. 846*)

One school was set up in Ted Le Grice's bach with Mr Greinhow teaching them. When he left in 1927, a young student of his, Lucy Le Grice, just 16 years old, took over as teacher. All she had to help her teach was a blackboard, a map of New Zealand, an old world map and a small quantity of graph paper and chalk. (*December 1986. A brief outline of the Piha History of Piha Schools, Piha Community News, Pg 2*)

The next school at Piha was in the old Piha Hall. There was no school in Piha from 1949 – 1954.

It was in this period that Bruce Byers started school. When he was five he went to a correspondence school that was hidden away in a shed on Rayner Road.

The school reopened again in the old Piha Hall in 1954 because there were enough children in Piha. The school had to share the hall with the community groups. Bruce Byers, one of the pupils, remembers the children having to move their desks to the side for community dances and performances.

Unfortunately, the school closed down shortly after, because pupil numbers declined. Bruce and all the other children at Piha School had to go to Oratia School.

That meant that Bruce had to travel from Piha to Oratia on a hot, dusty and very uncomfortable road in summer or a wet, foggy, slippery and unsafe gravel road in winter.

This was very difficult for Bruce's family so Mum and kids moved to Waiatarua on the weekdays to live in a rented house. They only returned home to Piha on the weekends to see their father. They even moved down to Whanganui for a few years so they could go to school.

In 1958 the Piha School reopened in the Piha Hall. There were only twelve children in the whole class/school. Six of the children were five and six year olds so the teacher asked Bruce (because he was so advanced for his age) to teach the little ones. This meant that Bruce got behind in his own education. Soon after that a new teacher by the name of Mr Murray came and taught. He helped Bruce to catch up with his school work.

Bruce found that going to school out at Piha was a great experience for him:

"You learn to be aware of your surroundings and what's going on the whole time. Unfortunately a lot of children these days are taken to and from school. They don't learn to be aware of what's going on around them."

In 1959 a new school building arrived. It was trucked up from Taurangaruru where it had been built for their school in 1934. Imagine what the children of Piha felt like with their very own classroom for the first time.

Their playground was just a swampy paddock with horses, cattle and a little river running through it. They didn't have any plastic slides, adventure playgrounds or things that we have nowadays. Bruce remembers the kids playing football, but there were never enough kids for a team.

The school shut for the last time in 1961. The children must have been sad on their last day. From then until now the Piha children have had to go to Oratia School.

The school children left Piha, and the old building was put to use by many different groups.

In the 1960's and 1970's the land and building were used by the Auckland College of Education.

Sometime in the late 1970's or early 1980's the Piha Playgroup was held in the old school house.

In the 1980s school children once again used the old school building and land, but now as an outdoor education centre. Auckland Intermediate School children would camp on the squishy, boggy school field for a few days and do exciting activities such as: canoeing, bushwalking, sand sculptures and bush studies.

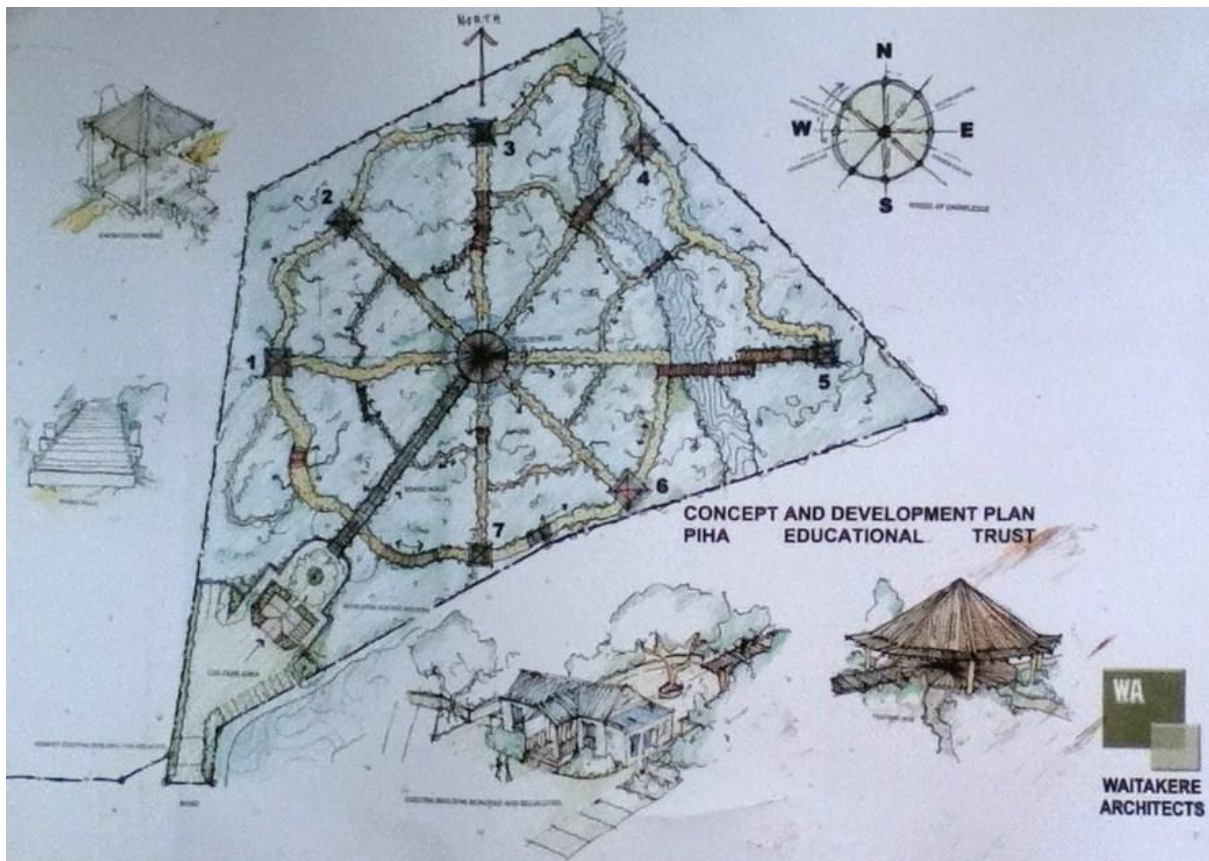
Then in the mid 1980s all community use stopped. The only activity on the land was horse grazing. The building was rented out as accommodation from the early 2000s to Tony, the local TV aerial installer, and Buddhist.

From the boggy marsh a new project is now beginning. West Auckland schools are once again starting to use the land and building.

The land is being restored to its natural state. Many wetland plants are being planted by the children of West Auckland, to become part of a big wetland information centre.

Joy Eaton, from the Piha Education Trust showed me around the old school and the marshy field:

“This piece of land has been cleared for a very long time. What we wanted to do was return it to what it would be naturally. So we are planting lots of plants that would be in the wet. Look out there and you will see there are some very wet parts. There are lots of reed things in there, and then we will create pathways so that people like you can take a wander through and see what a wetland looks like”



Concept plan for the old Piha School land from the Piha Education Trust

Joy also told me that they are going to renovate the old building. I hope they keep the old black board that is still in very good condition because it is a memory of what people used to do in the old school.

When I went to visit the old school site I was very surprised when Joy told me that my school had been involved in the first planting earlier this year.

I spoke to two students from the class that went and planted trees at Piha.

“We liked planting lots of kowhai trees, reeds and flaxes because trees give us oxygen.”

My school is even growing flaxes and grasses to plant in the swamp.

I am excited about what’s going to happen in the future at the school site, satisfied about the new native wetland that is being created and I now understand why there isn’t a school in such a wet, mushy and squishy place.

References:

Author unidentified (December 1986). *A brief outline of the Piha History of Piha*, Piha Community News

Author unidentified (November 1995). *Tremors At Barnett Hall*, Piha Community News, Pg 1.

A Beasley (December 1934). *Plans of Taurangaruru School Building*

JT Diamond Collection Archive No. 846

Sandra Coney, (1997) *Piha A History in Images*, The Keyhole Press

NZ Herald (6 September 61) *Piha Pupils (all 5 of them) lose school*

Information From Piha Education Trust, courtesy of Joy Eaton

Timeline of schools in Piha

Henderson Intermediate School: Camp programme 1989

Old Piha School Building timeline

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to Joy Eaton from the Piha Education Trust for showing us the interior of the old Piha School building and for being interviewed about the old school building and grounds. This interview took place on 2/6/12 from 11.20-11.45am.

Thank you to Bruce Byers for recalling his memories of school life in Piha. This telephone interview took place on 23/6/12 from 10.00- 10.45am

Photos:

1. Old Piha School building – taken by Tasha Gray, mother of Liv Haysom.
2. Concept plan for the old Piha School land from the Piha Education Trust.